

CLAIMS

1. A content distribution system including at least one distribution server for distributing digital contents via a network in response to requests from user terminals, the content distribution system comprising:

a reference server operable to hold at least one piece of location information showing a location of a distribution server on the network, and transmit one of the pieces of location information to one of the user terminals in response to a user request,

wherein each distribution server includes:

a determining unit operable to determine, when the distribution server is accessed by one of the user terminals, whether the user terminal has connected to the distribution server using one of the at least one pieces of location information received from the reference server as a connection target;

a generating unit operable to generate:

(1) a piece of first payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the distribution server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected without receiving the piece of location information from the

reference server, and

(2) a piece of second payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to both the distribution server and the reference server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected using the piece of location information received from the reference server; and

a transmitting unit operable to transmit (a) one of the generated pieces of first and second payment information and (b) a digital content to the user terminal.

2. The content distribution system of Claim 1, wherein:

the piece of first payment information instructs the user terminal to pay all of a purchase fee for playback rights of the digital content to the distribution server; and

the piece of second payment information instructs the user terminal to pay $\alpha\%$ of the purchase fee for playback rights of the digital content to the reference server, and $(100-\alpha)\%$ to the distribution server.

3. The content distribution system of Claim 2, wherein:

the piece of second payment information instructs the user terminal to pay $\alpha\%$ of the purchase fee to the reference server as a commission for having notified the user terminal of a

distribution server location.

4. The content distribution system of Claim 1, including a plurality of distribution servers, wherein the reference server includes:

a first storage unit operable to store a plurality of pieces of location information, each showing a location of one of the plurality of distribution servers, in correspondence with content-related phrases, each relating to a digital content transmitted by the distribution server;

a receiving unit operable to receive a keyword input from the user terminal when the user terminal performs an access; and

a search unit operable to search for at least one piece of location information with a content-related phrase partially or wholly matching the keyword input, and output the matching at least one piece of location information to the user terminal.

5. The content distribution system of Claim 4, wherein: the first storage unit is further operable to store a plurality of pieces of content sales information in correspondance with content-related phrases for each digital

content, each piece of content sales information showing, for each digital content, one of an encoding method, a playback quality, and a purchase fee for playback rights; and

the reference server further includes:

a distribution guide generation unit operable to fetch, if the search unit has found content-related phrases matching the keyword, pieces of content sales information corresponding to the content-related phrases, and generating distribution guide information from the pieces of content sales information,

and wherein the search unit is operable to transmit the generated distribution guide information to the user terminal in correspondence with pieces of location information for distribution servers transmitting corresponding digital contents.

6. The content distribution system of Claim 4, wherein the first storage unit is further operable to store pieces of playback software information, each showing playback software for playing back a digital content, in correspondence with location information for each distribution server transmitting the digital content;

the receiving unit is operable to receive, from the user terminal, a piece of playback software information indicating

a playback software used by the user terminal, together with a keyword specifying the digital content; and

the search unit is operable to inform the user terminal, when a plurality of content-related phrases matching the keyword exist, of only the content-related phrases with a corresponding piece of playback software information matching the piece of playback software information generated by the user terminal.

7. The content distribution system of Claim 4, wherein the reference server further includes:

a second storage unit operable to store a plurality of digital contents in correspondence with content-related phrases;

a determining unit operable to determine whether a keyword input received from the user terminal partially or wholly matches a content-related phrase stored in the second storage unit;

a reading unit operable to read, when a matching content-related phrase exists, a digital content corresponding to the matching content-related phrase from the plurality of digital contents stored in the second storage unit;

a generating unit operable to generate a piece of payment

information instructing a user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the reference server when the matching related phrase exists;

a transmitting unit operable to transmit the read digital content and the generated piece of payment information to the user terminal; and

wherein, when the matching related phrase cannot be found in the second storage unit, the search unit is operable to inform the user terminal of a piece of location information stored in the first storage unit that has a content-related phrase partially or wholly matching the keyword.

8. The content distribution system of Claim 7, wherein the reference server further includes:

a collection unit operable to collect sales commission from a purchase fee for playback rights for a digital content paid to the reference server by the user terminal, and pay a remainder of the purchase fee to an owner of the digital content, in accordance with a piece of third payment information.

9. A content distribution system including at least one distribution server for distributing digital contents via a

network in response to requests from user terminals, the content distribution system comprising:

a reference server operable to hold at least one piece of location information showing a location of a distribution server on the network, and transmit one of the pieces of location information to one of the user terminals in response to a user request,

wherein each distribution server includes:

a receiving unit operable to receive a purchase fee for a digital content from the user terminal when the distribution server is accessed by one of the user terminals;

a transmission unit operable to transmit the digital content to the user terminal if payment has been made;

a determining unit operable to determine, when the distribution server is accessed by the user terminal, whether or not the user terminal has connected to the distribution server using a piece of location information received from the reference server as a connection target;

a payment unit operable to pay one part of a purchase fee for the digital content to the reference server as commission for providing the location of the distribution server to the user, when the user terminal is determined to have connected to the distribution server using the piece of location

information received from the reference server.

10. The content distribution system of Claim 9, including a plurality of distribution servers, wherein the reference server includes:

a first storage unit operable to store a plurality of pieces of location information, each showing a location of one of the plurality of distribution servers, in correspondence with content-related phrases, each relating to a digital content transmitted by the distribution server;

a receiving unit operable to receive a keyword input from the user terminal when the user terminal performs an access; and

a search unit operable to search for at least one piece of location information with a content-related phrase partially or wholly matching the keyword input, and output the matching at least one piece of location information to the user terminal.

11. The content distribution system of Claim 10, wherein the first storage unit is further operable to store a plurality of pieces of content sales information in correspondance with content-related phrases for each digital

content, each piece of content sales information showing, for each digital content, one of an encoding method, a playback quality, and a purchase fee for playback rights; and

the reference server further includes:

a distribution guide generation unit operable to fetch, if the search unit has found content-related phrases matching the keyword, pieces of content sales information corresponding to the content-related phrases, and generating distribution guide information from the pieces of content sales information,

and wherein the search unit is operable to transmit the generated distribution guide information to the user terminal in correspondence with pieces of location information for distribution servers transmitting corresponding digital contents.

12. The content distribution system of Claim 10, wherein the first storage unit is further operable to store pieces of playback software information, each showing playback software for playing back a digital content, in correspondence with location information for each distribution server transmitting the digital content;

the receiving unit is operable to receive, from the user terminal, a piece of playback software information indicating

a playback software used by the user terminal, together with a keyword specifying the digital content; and

the search unit is operable to inform the user terminal, when a plurality of content-related phrases matching the keyword exist, of only the content-related phrases with a corresponding piece of playback software information matching the piece of playback software information generated by the user terminal.

13. The content distribution system of Claim 10, wherein the reference server further includes:

a second storage unit operable to store a plurality of digital contents in correspondence with content-related phrases;

a determining unit operable to determine whether a keyword input received from the user terminal partially or wholly matches a content-related phrase stored in the second storage unit;

a reading unit operable to read, when a matching content-related phrase exists, a digital content corresponding to the matching content-related phrase from the plurality of digital contents stored in the second storage unit;

a generating unit operable to generate a piece of payment

information instructing a user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the reference server when the matching related phrase exists;

a transmitting unit operable to transmit the read digital content and the generated piece of payment information to the user terminal; and

wherein, when the matching related phrase cannot be found in the second storage unit, the search unit is operable to inform the user terminal of a piece of location information stored in the first storage unit that has a content-related phrase partially or wholly matching the keyword.

14. The content distribution system of Claim 13, wherein the reference server further includes:

a collection unit operable to collect sales commission from a purchase fee for playback rights for a digital content paid to the reference server by the user terminal, and pay a remainder of the purchase fee to an owner of the digital content, in accordance with a piece of third payment information.

15. A content distribution system comprising:

a plurality of distribution servers operable to store a

plurality of digital contents that are encoded versions of a same copyrighted material corresponding to different types of playback software, each version being stored in a different distribution server, and transmit a stored digital content to a user terminal in response to a user request;

a user terminal, in which one type of playback software has been installed, operable to play back digital contents using the installed playback software; and

a reference server operable to hold pieces of content management information showing which distribution server stores digital contents corresponding to each type of playback software, and inform the user terminal which distribution server stores digital contents corresponding to the type of playback software installed in the user terminal, in response to a user request.

16. A reference server in a content distribution system that includes a plurality of distribution servers for distributing digital contents via a network in response to requests from user terminals, the reference server comprising:

a storage unit operable to store a plurality of pieces of content management information, each piece of content management information including (1) location information

showing a location on the network of one of the plurality of distribution servers, and (2) a content-related phrase relating to a digital content transmitted by the distribution server;

a fetching unit operable to fetch from the storage unit all pieces of content management information containing a content-related phrase that partially or wholly matches a keyword received from a user terminal; and

a distribution guide information generating unit operable to generate distribution guide information prompting a user to make a purchase, using the pieces of content management information fetched from the storage unit.

17. A content distribution system comprising:

a plurality of distribution servers, each operable to store a plurality of digital contents corresponding to a different type of playback software;

a playback software supply server, in which a plurality of types of playback software are installed;

a reference server operable to store in correspondence (1) pieces of location information each showing a location of one of the plurality of distribution servers, (2) content-related phrases each relating to a digital content transmitted by the

distribution server, and (3) playback software information showing a type of playback software corresponding to the digital content;

a user terminal, in which at least one type of playback software is installed, operable to play back digital contents using the installed playback software;

wherein the user terminal includes:

a receiving unit operable to receive a user selection, selecting a digital content with a content-related phrase that is stored in the reference server;

a download unit operable to download the digital content selected by the user by accessing one of the plurality of distribution servers based on a piece of location information corresponding to the content-related phrase for the digital content;

an installing unit operable to determine whether the type of playback software corresponding to the digital content is installed in the user terminal, and if the corresponding type of playback software is not installed, download the corresponding type of playback software from the playback software supply server, and install the downloaded playback software; and

a deletion unit operable to delete at least one of the

types of playback software installed in the user terminal, when the downloaded playback software is installed.

18. A content distribution system including at least one distribution server for distributing digital contents via a network in response to requests from user terminals, the content distribution system comprising:

a reference server operable to hold at least one piece of location information showing a location of a distribution server on the network, and transmit one of the pieces of location information to one of the user terminals in response to a user request, wherein:

the distribution server is operable to transmit a digital content to one of the user terminals, and

the reference server includes:

a determining unit operable to determine, when the distribution server is accessed by the user terminals, whether the user terminal has connected to the distribution server using one of the at least one pieces of location information received from the reference server as a connection target;

a generating unit operable to generate:

(1) a piece of first payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the distribution

server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected without receiving the piece of location information from the reference server, and

(2) a piece of second payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to both the distribution server and the reference server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected using the piece of location information received from the reference server; and

a transmitting unit operable to transmit one of the generated pieces of first and second payment information.

19. A content distribution system including at least one distribution server for distributing digital contents via a network in response to requests from user terminals, the content distribution system comprising:

a reference server operable to hold at least one piece of location information showing a location of a distribution server on the network, and transmit one of the pieces of location information to one of the user terminals in response to a user request, and

a billing server operable to perform settling of accounts once a digital content has been transmitted to one of the user terminals,

the billing server including:

a determining unit operable to determine, when the distribution server is accessed by the user terminal, whether the user terminal has connected to the distribution server using one of the at least one pieces of location information received from the reference server as a connection target;

a generating unit operable to generate:

(1) a piece of first payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the distribution server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected without receiving the piece of location information from the reference server, and

(2) a piece of second payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to both the distribution server and the reference server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected using the piece of location information received from the reference server; and

a transmitting unit operable to transmit one of the generated pieces of first and second payment information.

20. A content distribution business having at least one distribution server for distributing digital contents via a network in response to requests from user terminals, the

content distribution business being realized by:

a reference server operable to hold at least one piece of location information showing a location of a distribution server on the network, and transmit one of the pieces of location information to one of the user terminals in response to a user request,

wherein each distribution server includes:

a determining unit operable to determine, when the distribution server is accessed by one of the user terminals, whether the user terminal has connected to the distribution server using one of the at least one pieces of location information received from the reference server as a connection target;

a generating unit operable to generate:

(1) a piece of first payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the distribution server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected without receiving the piece of location information from the reference server, and

(2) a piece of second payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to both the distribution server and the reference server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected using the piece of location

information received from the reference server; and

a transmitting unit operable to transmit (a) one of the generated pieces of first and second payment information, and (b) a digital content to the user terminal.

21. A content distribution business having at least one distribution server for distributing digital contents via a network in response to requests from user terminals, the content distribution business being realized by:

a reference server operable to hold at least one piece of location information showing a location of a distribution server on the network, and transmit one of the pieces of location information to one of the user terminals in response to a user request, wherein:

the distribution server is operable to transmit a digital contents to one of the user terminals, and

the reference server includes:

a determining unit operable to determine, when the distribution server is accessed by the user terminal, whether the user terminal has connected to the distribution server using one of the at least one pieces of location information received from the reference server as a connection target;

a generating unit operable to generate:

(1) a piece of first payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the distribution server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected without receiving the piece of location information from the reference server, and

(2) a piece of second payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to both the distribution server and the reference server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected using the piece of location information received from the reference server; and

a transmitting unit operable to transmit one of the generated pieces of first and second payment information.

22. A content distribution business having at least one distribution server for distributing digital contents via a network in response to requests from user terminals, the content distribution business realized by:

a reference server operable to hold at least one piece of location information showing a location of a distribution server on the network, and transmit one of the pieces of location information to one of the user terminals in response to a user request, and

a billing server operable to perform settling of accounts

once a digital content has been transmitted to one of the user terminals,

the billing server including:

a determining unit operable to determine, when the distribution server is accessed by the user terminal, whether the user terminal has connected to the distribution server using one of the at least one pieces of location information received from the reference server as a connection target;

a generating unit operable to generate:

(1) a piece of first payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to the distribution server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected without receiving the piece of location information from the reference server, and

(2) a piece of second payment information instructing the user terminal to pay a purchase fee to both the distribution server and the reference server, when the user terminal is determined to have connected using the piece of location information received from the reference server; and

a transmitting unit operable to transmit one of the generated pieces of first and second payment information.